

2013

# OWLs Across Borders: An Exploratory Study on the place of Online Writing Labs in the EFL Context

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## Recommended Citation

Paiz, Joshua, "OWLs Across Borders: An Exploratory Study on the place of Online Writing Labs in the EFL Context" (2013). *Purdue Writing Lab/Purdue OWL Graduate Student Presentations*. Paper 7.  
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/writinglabgradpres/7>

# OWLs Across Borders: An Exploratory Study of OWLs in the EFL Context

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Joshua M. Paiz, MA

**PURDUE**  
UNIVERSITY

早上好我的同事 (tong2shi4) Good morning my dear colleagues! My name is Joshua Paiz, the Coordinator of the Purdue Online Writing Lab. Today, I'm going to share with you the findings from a year-long study examining usages patterns of and special considerations for Online Writing Labs in the traditionally-defined EFL context. This study was originally commissioned by the Purdue Online Writing Lab to uncover how we were meeting, and in some cases not meeting, the needs of our users across the globe.

OWLs Across Borders

## **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

The Purdue Online Writing Lab is one of the world's first and largest, free online writing resources. For the past twenty years, it has sought to provide users with up-to-date, easy consume resources to help them better grasp various aspects of writing, ranging from the in-and-outs of MLA, APA, and CMS style sheets, grammar, and writing in the disciplines. When it first launched in 1994, it's original target audience were individuals at Purdue University and writers across the state of Indiana, in keeping with Purdue University's mission as a land-, sea-, and air-grant university. Since then, however, it has come to be used by millions of users from across all seven continents.

Today's presentation will present the findings of an internal study that examined users uses, opinions, and needs of on-line writing labs. The hopes are that these findings can help to inform potential OWL Designers, Developers about potential best practices and special considerations when designing writing resources for writers in the traditionally-defined EFL context. Before going any further, allow me to situate, somewhat, the present study.

## Situating *OWLs Abroad*

- Tan (2011) “Innovating Writing Centers and Online Writing Labs”
  - OWL innovations in the EFL context – Western Inspirations
  - Wider penetration of synchronous, online tutorials
  - Multilingual writing resources
- Gu and Ding (2002) “A New Means of Teaching English Writing”
  - OWLs as pedagogical support
- Rilling (2005) “The Development of an ESL OWL”
  - Synchronous, online tutoring best practices

While no study occurs in a vacuum, and the present study is no exception, there seemingly is an extreme dearth of published research.

In regards to studies carried out on OWLs in the EFL context there has been precious little done, and even less that has been reported in English-medium journals. During my initial review of literature last summer, I found three articles that dealt with this. Of these, only one was available in English, Bee-Hoon Tan’s “Innovating Writing Centers and Online Writing Labs Outside of North America”, which appeared in the *Asian EFL Journal*. This article, examined both writing center and online writing lab innovations that have taken place in Europe and the United States. This scholar then explored how the best-practices of these institutions could inform Writing Center practice and the creation of Online Writing Labs in the Asian context. Tan also noted some innovations happening in online writing labs outside of the Western context, this included the use of synchronous, online writing tutorials and eschewing a monolingual, that is an English-only, approach by offering writing resources addressing writing in the local language.

Recently, one of my Chinese colleagues, who is performing a literature review of online writing labs in China, reported to me that she was only able to find one piece on OWLs in Chinese-medium Journals, “A New Means of Teaching English Writing” from *Foreign Language Instruction*. In this article, Gu and Ding explored using Online

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## **THE *OWL ABROAD* RESEARCH PROJECT**

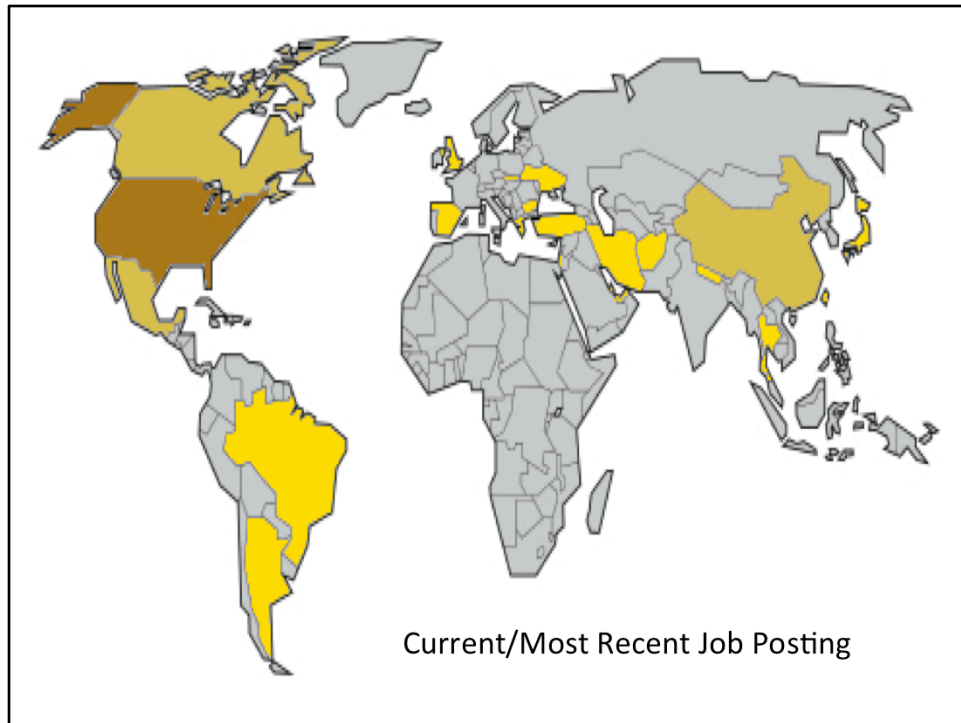
Allow me to now introduce you more specifically to the OWL Abroad Research Project. This research project was developed by the staff of the Purdue OWL during the summer of 2012. Data collection was closed in March of 2013 and formal data analysis was completed in June of 2013. In the following, I will present you first to the instrument used in this study before discussing a few of the potentially more relevant findings.

## Research Instrument

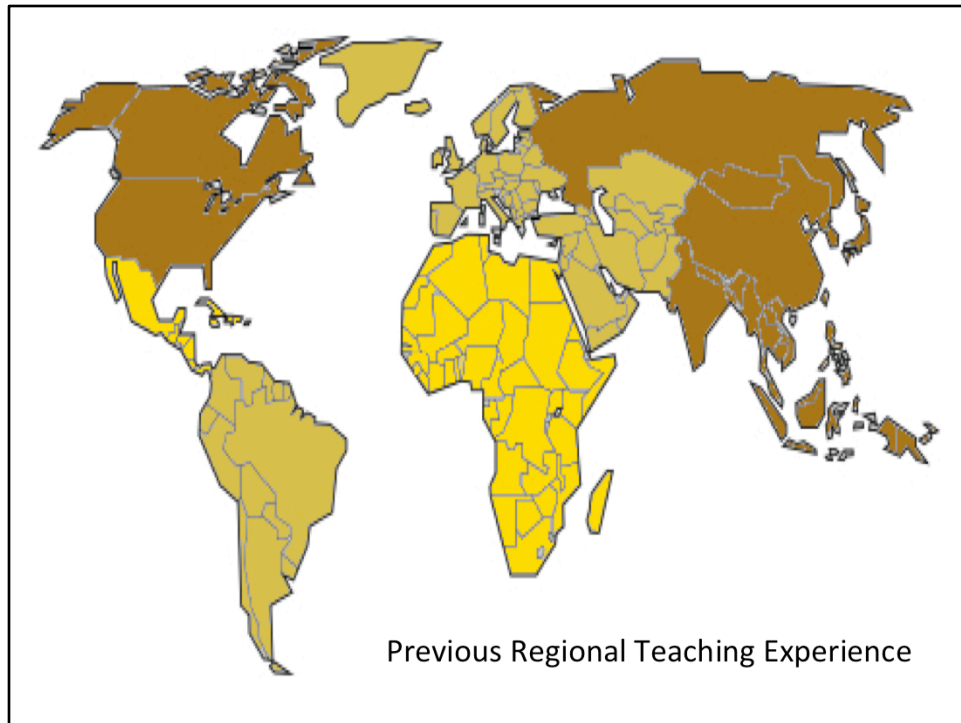
- 40-item survey w/ opt-in email follow-up
  - 7 demographic questions
  - 3 general OWL usage/attitudes questions
  - 29 Purdue OWL specific usage/attitudes questions
    - 20 mandatory/9 optional follow-up
  - 1 follow-up contact question
- 4-item, open-ended follow-up email interview

To carry out the research we deployed a two-part instrument. The first part of the instrument was a forty-one item survey, developed using the Qualtrics survey package. This survey was comprised of a bank of yes/no, multiple-choice/multiple-answer, likert-scale, and open ended questions developed by Purdue OWL staff during June of 2012. The final survey contained: 7 demographic questions to help the Purdue OWL staff gain a better sense of respondents' teaching history--attempting to account for national and educational contexts and years of service; 3 general OWL usage and attitudes questions; and, 29 Purdue OWL specific questions, focusing on individual resources types, their usage patterns, and perceived effectiveness. Out of the 29 Purdue OWL specific questions 20 were required question and 9 were optional follow-up, open-ended questions. The survey also contained one contact question. This survey was sent out to eight professional organizations that target L2 writing practitioners, scholars and program administrators for their member-base.

Once the survey was completed, a 4-item open-ended follow-up interview was conducted via email. This follow-up was sent out to the 46 individuals who self-identified as being willing to be contacted by Purdue OWL staff for additional questions and comments.



This map highlights the countries reported as the most recent EFL-teaching posting of the respondents. What is interesting is that the majority of responses came from so-called Center Countries—from countries where English fills the role of the primary or official institutional language. This occurs in places like the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Also represented disproportionately to any other contexts are Expanding Circle Countries, countries where English plays at least a limited institutional role--In this case, Mexico.



However, if we look at the regions in which respondents report having taught in the past—and this is broken down by continent—we see a slightly different picture. We see a greater deal of activity in both the expanding and outer circles. That is, we see much more activity on the part of participants in the traditionally-defined English as a Foreign Language Contexts.



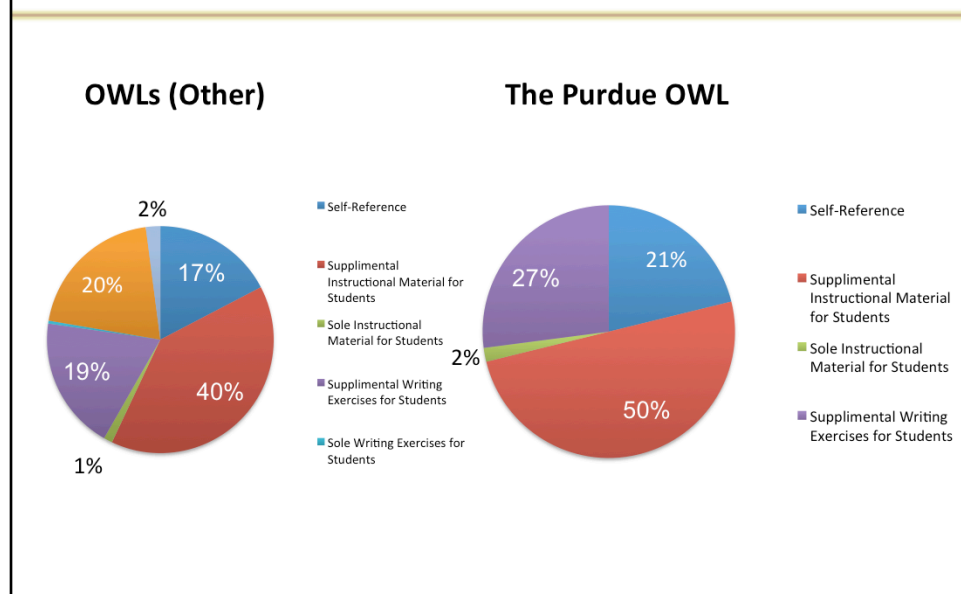
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## **MAJOR FINDINGS & OWL USAGE**

What is being shared to you today is only a partial list of what has been deemed our most important findings from this study. For a complete list of our findings, please contact me after the presentation, and I will provide you with additional details.

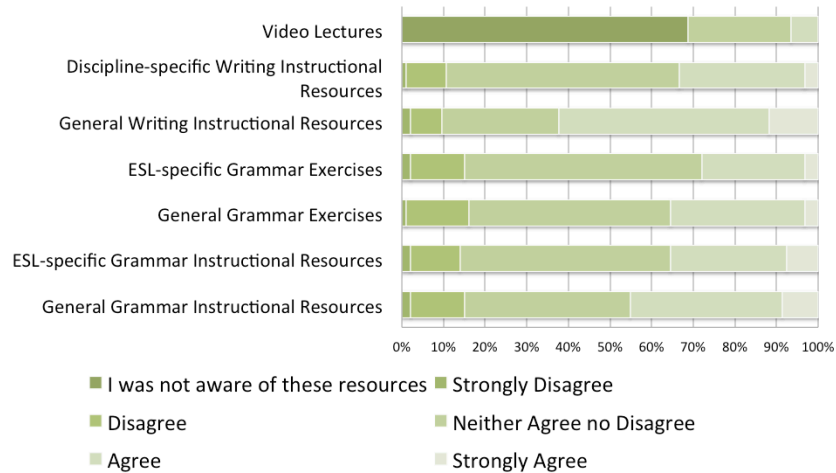
Allow me to begin by saying that 40% of respondents (53 of 132) report regularly using online writing labs as pedagogical tools. 70% of this number report making relatively regular using the Purdue OWL for teaching.

## Major Finding 1: OWL Usage Patterns



Our data show that dominant usage patterns for both OWLs in general and the Purdue OWL more specifically mirror one another in many key ways. For example, respondents report using both general OWL and the Purdue OWL rather often as resources for supplemental instructional materials. Also, usages of OWL in general and the Purdue OWL more specifically are relatively high in regards to use as self-reference tools and as sources of supplemental writing exercises. However, OWLs aside from the Purdue OWL tend to also be used semi-regularly for supplemental grammar exercises. Despite anecdotal evidence that the Purdue OWL specifically is often used as the sole instructional text in some classes in the EFL context, this could not be verified by this research. This could, in part, be due a possible conflation of the terms ESL and EFL by respondents.

## Major Finding 2: Appropriateness of Purdue OWL Resources for L2 Writing



One of the major exigencies for this study was to determine if Purdue OWL resources were meeting the needs of its users. Looking at these data as a whole it is clear that there is no small degree of ambivalence about the appropriateness of existing Purdue OWL resources for the teaching of L2 writing, particularly in the EFL context. This is represented by the high percentages of respondents that responded neither agree nor disagree in response to questions about the appropriateness of Purdue OWL resources with out any modification. This is most apparent with regard to Purdue OWL discipline-specific writing instructional resources. And, perhaps even more shockingly in the ambivalence in regards to the Purdue OWL's ESL-specific and general grammar exercises, and ESL-specific and general grammar instructional materials. An examination of some of the email interview responses may help to shed some light on these findings.

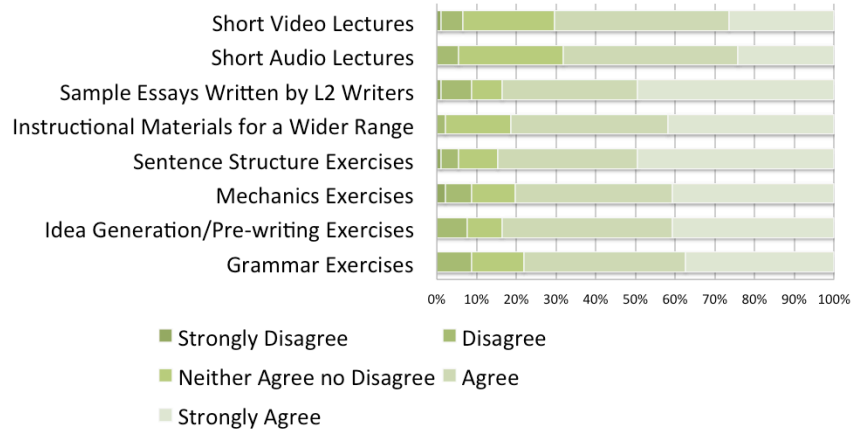
## Major Finding 2: Appropriateness of Purdue OWL Resources for L2 Writing

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- They sheer amount of material offered on each link or page can be overwhelming (from Interview 1) .
- There is a lot of text which can be intimidating to many English language learners (from Interview 2).
- The explanations and examples are written for US Freshmen and are at a higher level of language than most EFL learners, even if they are at a lower to higher advanced level of proficiency (from Interview 5) .

The two largest barriers to use of the L2 Writing-specific resources were the density of some resources on the screen and the linguistic complexity of many of the resources available on the Purdue OWL. With regard to resource density, interviewees reported that “the sheer amount of material offered on each link or page can be overwhelming (from Interview 1),” or that “there is a lot of text which can be intimidating to many English language learners (from Interview 2).” Many interviewees also reported that there were a number of linguistic issues that made adopting Purdue OWL materials in the classroom problematic. One interviewee reported that, “The explanations and examples are written for US Freshmen and are at a higher level of language than most EFL learners, even if they are at a lower to higher advanced level of proficiency (from Interview 5).”

### Major Finding 3: Resources that EFL Practitioners Desire



The data show that practitioners would welcome a wide variety of new L2 writing focused resources, with the strongest interest being in static, that is, HTML-based resources that cover topics ranging from grammar and mechanics to idea generation and general writing. Also of possibly great interest to practitioners are sample essays written by L2 writers. Respondents indicated that any new resources developed should be targeted at a wider range of proficiency levels. While still showing a high level of possible interest, there appears to be less enthusiasm for more dynamic resources (audio and/or audio/visual lectures).

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## **IMPLICATIONS FOR L2 PRACTITIONERS & OWL DESIGNERS**

Allow me to conclude by discussing a few of the implications of these findings for both L2 Writing Practitioners and potential OWL designers.

## Implications

### **L2 Writing Practitioners**

- Modifications for linguistic appropriateness
- Scaffolding of culturally steeped references in writing instructional resources

### **OWL Designers**

- There is a real exigency for local/regional OWLs, which address local needs and writing norms
- The creation of L1 writing resources
- Resources informed by the potential for L1 and L2 writing to positively influence each other

it is clear from the findings above that materials from North American-based OWLs will need special consideration before being deployed in the L2 writing classroom. This may include the need to modify OWL resources to be more linguistically appropriate. However, one should again note that many OWLs contain copyrighted material and modification may not be an option. The Purdue OWL, for example, allows users to use and download its resources for educational purposes, but it does not permit any modification of resources. Another major consideration for practitioners may be the need to scaffold North American OWL materials, particularly considering that some of these resources may be culturally bound, and that their meaning may not be as strong for those not socialized into Western literary and academic traditions.

I would like to echo Tan's (2011) call for more local/regional OWLs, as these OWLs are better situated to meet the needs of L2 writers in EFL context. Lobbying for resources and effective planning are vital. While reinventing the wheel should not be necessary in this digital age, there is the need to meet the unique local needs of writers in the EFL context. The data presented above clearly indicates that many OWL resources are too linguistically complex for writers in the EFL context, who may be at lower proficiency levels than L2 writers matriculated into North American universities. This is just one of the considerations for potential EFL OWL developers, and it is one way to advocate for resources for OWL development. Another

Thank you for your attention

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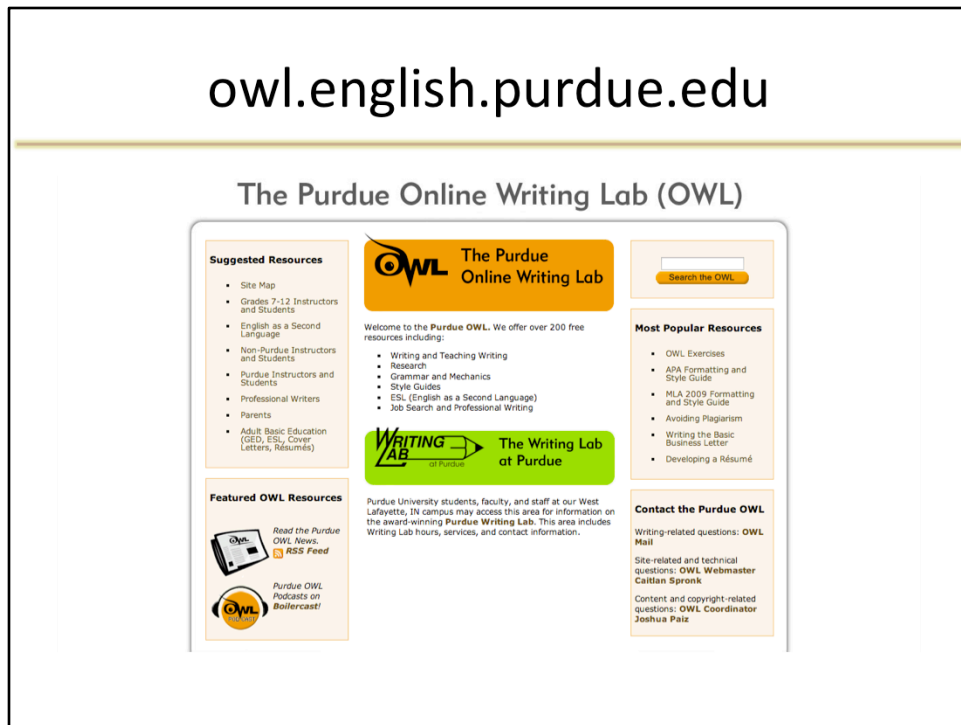
Contact: *JPaiz@Purdue.edu*



Since my time is now, most certainly more than over, I would like to first acknowledge that this study does have limitations, and I will happily discuss them, or any other matters that you might wish, during the Q&A.

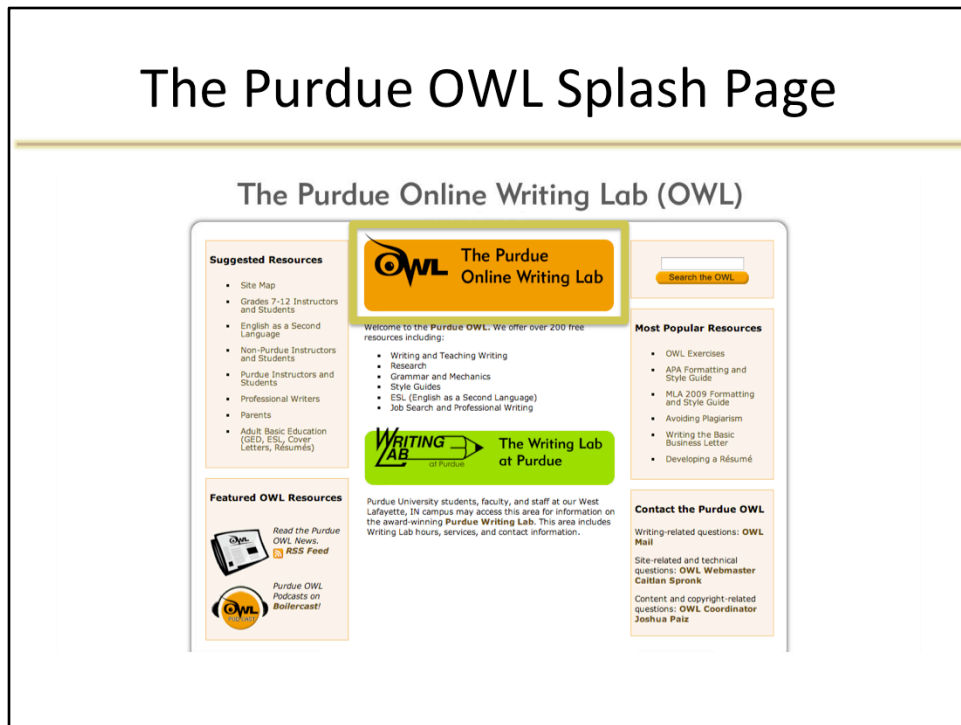


# owl.english.purdue.edu



The Purdue Online Writing Lab, from here forward the Purdue OWL, is a collection of over 900 resources dedicated to helping writers improve their academic, professional, and creative writing skills. For almost 20 years, since it's birth in the spring of 1994, the Purdue OWL has been committed to providing learners, educators, and writers with quality educational material at no cost to them. The Purdue OWL can be accessed by going to OWL.ENGLISH.PURDUE.EDU. What you see here is the Purdue OWL splash/landing page.

# The Purdue OWL Splash Page



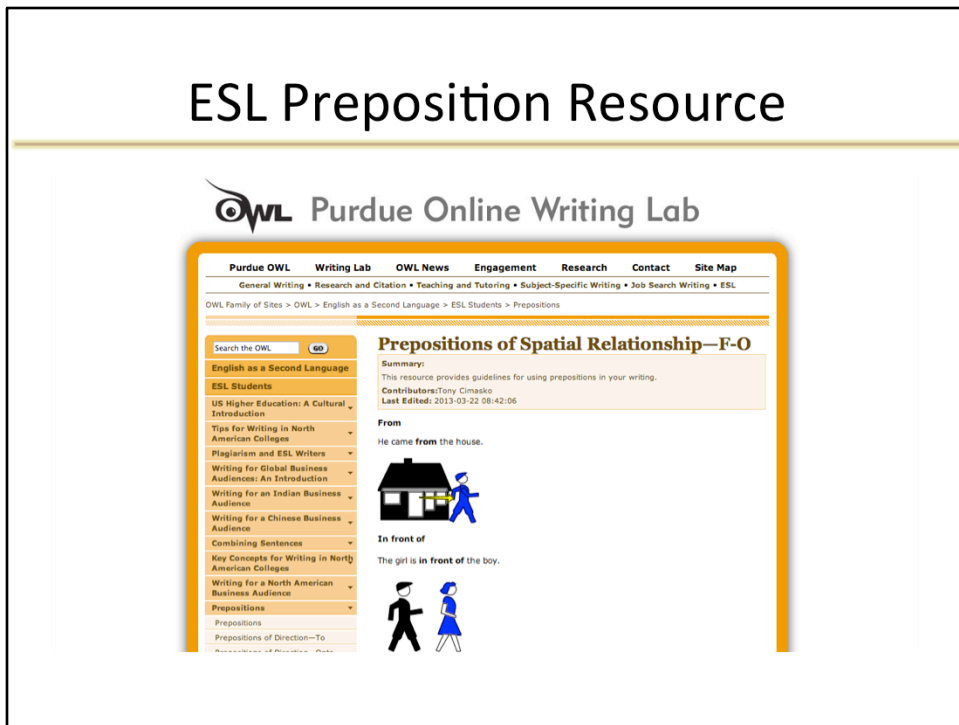
To access the online writing resources, simply click on the orange box that says the Purdue Online Writing. The content under the green link, The Writing Lab at Purdue, pertains only to students, faculty, and staff at Purdue University's West Lafayette Campus.

# The Purdue OWL Landing Page



From here, you will be able to access all Purdue OWL related educational and training content. All content is currently organized using the following Taxonomy: General Writing resources, containing things like idea-generation exercises and strategies for dealing with writers block; Research and Citation resources, which deals with MLA, APA, and CMS citation and style guidelines, Teaching and Tutoring resource to help train writing instructors and writing lab tutors; Subject Specific resources, discussing a variety of topics like writing in Engineering and writing for Business classes; Job writing resource, discussing how to craft a strong resume, CV, and cover letter. And a bank of resources dedicated to the unique needs of second language writers.

# ESL Preposition Resource



While the acquainting you fully with the Purdue OWL is outside of the scope of this presentation, I do want to take the briefest of moments to show you a partial shot of one of our ESL resources. This is from our series on prepositions for ESL students. As you can see from the sidebar. We have resources dealing with writing for North American Academic audiences, dealing with student plagiarism, and writing for a number of global business audiences.